

LINCOLN

Address Delivered in Chicago,
February 9th, 1909, before
Columbia Post, G. A. R.

By
GEORGE E. ADAMS

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from

The Institute of Museum and Library Services through an Indiana State Library LSTA Grant

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

A great political career is partly the result of the character of a man, and partly the result of the character and demands of the time he lives in. However great a man may really be, if his genius does not fit the genius of his time, if he cannot render a service to his country or to the world at the time when his country or the world stand in need of that service, history will take little note of him. If King Charles the First had not tried to govern England in violation of the English Constitution, we should not have heard of Oliver Cromwell, the greatest ruler England ever had. If the British government had treated the North American colonies as liberally as it now treats Canada and Australia, history would have little to say of George Washington. Bismarck is one of the strongest personalities known to history. But if Bismarck had not lived just at the time when Prussia, Bavaria, Baden, and other kingdoms, principalities, and free cities of the German name were ready to be fused into a mighty German empire, his place in history would be much smaller than it is. It is therefore no disparagement of Lincoln's greatness to say that if he had not lived when the slavery question in this country came to a crisis, we should know him, if we knew him at all, only as an Illinois lawyer, not deeply learned in the law, but learned in human nature and gifted with the power of clear statement which made him an ir-

resistible advocate before a jury in a cause which he believed to be a just one.

Abraham Lincoln rendered two great services to his country. First he was a great advocate of a great cause. Then he was a great President in a great civil war. From 1854, when the repeal of the Missouri compromise threatened the territories of the Northwest with the curse of slavery, till 1860, when he was elected President, Lincoln was the foremost advocate of the doctrine that under the constitution as the fathers understood it, slavery was local and freedom was national.

But his fame will mainly rest, not on his clear logic and simple eloquence as the champion of freedom, but on the wisdom and firmness with which he guided his country in the hour of supreme peril.

We cannot do justice to his genius as a political leader of men without taking note of the confused state of feeling and opinion in regard to the Union and slavery at the beginning of the Civil War. It is misleading to think of it merely as a difference between the North and the South, the North being for the Union and against slavery and the South for slavery and against the Union. It was far more complicated than that. There was difference in the North and difference in the South. We know that there was a strong Union sentiment in the border States so-called; and I was once reminded in a striking way how strong it was as far south as Georgia. I was talking with a Georgia congressman when he said, "I must leave you now, for I have an errand in the pension office." Said I, "Has a Georgia congressman much business in the pension office?" Said he, "I have four thousand pensioners and pension cases from my congressional district." Said I, "I did not suppose so many of our boys settled in Georgia after the

war." Said he, "My soldier constituents did not come from the North! they were born in Georgia and their fathers and their fathers' fathers before them." Said I, "I had forgotten that we had any Georgia regiments in the Union army." Said he, "You had none. But you had Tennessee and North Carolina regiments. My constituents were so attached to the Union that they left their families and homes between sunset and sunrise and crossed the State line under cover of the dark to enlist in the Union Army."

Lincoln's political sagacity never lost sight of the open or secret Union feeling in the border States. If he had lost sight of it the war for the Union would have failed. But Lincoln's wisdom was shown not only in encouraging the Union feeling of the border States, but in controlling the radical anti-slavery feeling of New England, which would have converted the war for the preservation of the Union into a war for the abolition of slavery. If this radical feeling had not been kept in check during the early part of the war, the Union would have been dissolved and slavery would not have been abolished. There were anti-slavery disunionists in Massachusetts just before the outbreak of the war. One was Wendell Phillips. He called the constitution, which permitted slavery as a state institution, "a league with death and a covenant with hell." When South Carolina seceded, he applauded. He wished Massachusetts had the spirit to do likewise. Late in January, 1861, he made a disunion speech. Late in February he made another. On the twenty-first of April, standing on a platform with Old Glory over his head, he said, "I rejoice that for the first time in my anti-slavery life I am speaking under the stars and stripes and welcome the tread of Massachusetts men marshalled for war." He explained his sud-

den change of view by saying that he had not supposed that the North was in earnest. He had thought that the spirit of the North was choked with cotton dust and cankered with gold. He knew now that the war would sooner or later put an end to slavery. He demanded immediate abolition. When Lincoln refused, he became a bitterly hostile critic of the administration.

A change of view like that which came to Wendell Phillips came about the same time to another man, whose name and fame are dear to us in Illinois. I mean John A. Logan. All the world knows that at the beginning Logan did not sympathize with the effort made to maintain the Union by force of arms. It was not that he did not prize the Union, but he thought the Union was already lost and could not be restored. He thought therefore that blood shed to restore it would be shed in vain. He knew that Massachusetts was in earnest, for Massachusetts blood had been shed in the streets of Baltimore. But Logan's early associations were such that he did not think highly of Massachusetts or New England. To him the real people of the United States were the people of the Northwest and he could not believe that the Northwest, enterprising and prosperous as it was, would abandon its industrial activity and submit to the enormous sacrifices of a civil war. But the time came when he changed his mind. The story goes that he was sitting one afternoon on a hotel balcony overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue when a brigade of Northwestern troops came by on their way to the front. It is said that Logan watched them in silence and, after they had passed, sat for a while buried in thought. And then the light came to him as clearly and suddenly as it came to Saul on the road to Damascus. He saw now that the Northwest was in earnest. He saw that the Union could be saved and would

be saved, that the blood shed to save it would not be shed in vain, and that the only way to enduring peace must be cut with the sword. He hastened to his rooms and packed his trunk. He took the first train for home. He called on Southern Illinois to rise and Southern Illinois rose at his call and followed him into the Union Army.

Now the greatness of Lincoln's political genius lay in this: He was a man of the people. He had a sure instinctive knowledge of what was passing in the hearts and minds of his countrymen. He knew, therefore, what was not known by the congressmen, the editors, the scholars, and the orators of his time. He did not think that the political leaders of the South would lead the people of the South into secession. But he knew that if secession did come, the North would respond to his call and would submit to the fearful sacrifice of a Civil War. He saw with the eye of faith what Congressman Logan could not see till he beheld with his bodily eyes the stalwart regiments of the Northwest go swinging down Pennsylvania Avenue. He knew what Wendell Phillips, the cultivated scholar and consummate orator, could not know till he heard the tramp of Massachusetts men marshalled for war. He understood what Horace Greeley, the greatest editor in the country, and Henry Ward Beecher, the greatest preacher of his time, did not understand when, panic-stricken by the spectre of Civil War, they urged their countrymen to let the erring sisters depart in peace. His political sagacity, his foresight of the trend of opinions and events were so marvelous that many explained them by the direct inspiration of the Almighty.

If I were to name the three great qualities of President Lincoln, I should name them: wisdom, courage, and charity—and perhaps here, too, in the words of the Apostle,

we can say that the greatest of these is charity. Consider his moral courage. What do we mean by moral courage? We mean the willingness to do our whole duty without fear of misconstruction or criticism. It has sometimes been said that public life in a democratic republic like ours tends to impair the moral courage of a man. It has been said that we are so used to the rule of the majority that we let the majority rule not only our acts but our opinions and hesitate to do or to say what we know to be right because we dislike to be misunderstood or criticised. Hence it is said that many a man in public life will think more of avoiding censure than of earning praise. He will not be so anxious to serve the people as he is to avoid giving a handle to some political enemy in his state or congressional district.

However this may be, if a man goes into public life as Abraham Lincoln did in 1854, believing himself to be the representative of a high and holy cause, that cause will inspire him with moral courage. His courage will then be like the courage of the crusader. It will be the courage of a prophet of the Lord. It will be the courage of that pilot of whom Seneca tells in a passage which I once heard James Russell Lowell quote, of the pilot, who, while the lightning flashes and the thunder rolls and the great waves threaten to swallow his ship, looks up into the face of the tempest and cries, "O Neptune, you can drown me if you will, you can save me if you will, but whether you drown me or you save me, I will hold the rudder true." Ralph Waldo Emerson said of Lincoln that he was sent to the helm in a tornado. I do not suppose that Lincoln in 1856 or in 1858, when he had the great debate with Douglas or even in 1859, when the leading men of his party were demanding the nomination of Seward, believed that he, himself, would be called on to hold the helm in a tornado. He did foresee a storm.

"I believe," said he, "that there is a God—I know He hates injustice and slavery—I can see the coming of a storm—I believe His hand is in it—If He has a place and work for me, and I think He has, I believe I am ready. I am nothing—but the truth is everything." And so when he was called to steer the ship of state in the greatest political storm since the French Revolution, from first to last he held the rudder true.

It was not only sagacity but moral courage that he showed in that little gathering at Springfield, where he told his friends that he intended to say, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." They begged him to leave the words unsaid. They were sure to be misunderstood. They would certainly cause his defeat. He listened patiently and then said, "Gentlemen, the words must stand. I may go down, but if I do, I mean to go down with the truth."

When he went to Washington as President-elect, he found nearly all the leaders of his party advising compromise with secession. They had no doubt that the new President from Illinois, inexperienced in public life, would allow them to guide the policy of his administration. They were astonished to hear him say, "My course is as plain as a turnpike road. It is pointed out by the Constitution. I have no doubt which way I must go."

As it was at the beginning of his administration, so it was right through to the end. It was not clearly understood at the time, but now that the history of that time has been written, we know how much we owe not only to his sagacity but to his moral courage.

No great man has ever lived whose career exemplifies more fully than that of Lincoln the cardinal qualities of wisdom, courage, and charity. His charity was for the

slave and the slaveholder, the North and the South, the unsuccessful general and the private in the hospital. It was a charity that never failed, so that he could turn aside from the tremendous cares of State to write that simple and delicate letter of sympathy to Mrs. Bixby—lately quoted by President Roosevelt—a letter from the President of the United States to a poor working woman who had lost five sons in the war.

They are talking now at Washington of raising a fitting monument to Lincoln. A great highway between great cities, or a bridge over the Potomac, or a park, or a university, or a statue. It is altogether fitting that we should do this. But as Lincoln himself said at Gettysburg, the noblest way to honor the memory of a patriot is to consecrate ourselves to the work which he did for his country. That is, after all, the real meaning and purpose of a Lincoln monument.

A few years ago I saw in a public park of the City of Budapest in Hungary a noble statue of George Washington with this inscription: "Erected by the Hungarians of the United States." To me it was the most impressive thing I had seen in Europe. For I thought that those American citizens of Hungarian birth, when they erected this statue, did not mean merely to show their regard for the memory of Washington—they meant also to bear witness in the land of their birth to their devoted loyalty to their new fatherland which Washington helped to found.

So we, honoring Lincoln's memory in this centennial year of his birth, do so not for his sake but for our own, because in recalling what he did for the American people we give ourselves a new baptism of patriotism. His fame needs no memorial bridge, or building, or statue. This Republic is his monument. Think what has come to this Republic

since he died. We have come to be the richest and strongest nation in the world. Our government is the most stable government on earth. In the simpler and more enlightened diplomacy of to-day which aims to express the views of nations rather than the views of rulers and diplomats, the public opinion of the people of the United States is the greatest political power known among men. More than this: We have in the main used our international influence at The Hague and elsewhere, as Abraham Lincoln used his bodily strength during his boyhood and youth, not to quarrel but to prevent quarrels, not to oppress the weak but to save the weak from oppression. The world has come to understand this; so that when we send a great squadron of battleships round the world, they are everywhere received not with interest and courtesy alone, but with friendly enthusiasm, as if those great engines of war were carrying to other nations, as I think, indeed they are, the gospel of "peace on earth, good will toward men." This honorable and influential position, in the family of nations, we owe to the unity of the Republic, and the unity of the Republic, so far as we owe it to any one man, we owe to Abraham Lincoln.

